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Author: Katarzyna Juszczuk-Frelkiewicz

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Children in the family plans of young Koreans – sociological study of Korean students

Introduction

The fertility rate has been declining in South Korea for several decades. Currently, the fertility rate is very low and does not ensure generation renewal¹. The situation is very difficult and leads to ageing of the Korean population (see: Howe et al. 2007). Fewer and fewer women opt for motherhood, and even when they do, their decision is well thought and in most cases the pregnancy is planned. More and more contemporary Korean women want to get higher education and achieve professional success (The Economist 11.06.2016). It has direct consequences on postponing the decision on having children for later or even opting for childlessness.

Methodological bases of the research

The article is based on the research conducted among the students of the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul in South Korea in 2014. The research was carried out in an intentionally selected University in South Korea. The empirical research was carried out in the framework of the Young Scientists Research funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the University of Silesia in Katowice (IS/BM/KJF/2013).

¹ See more in chapter: Fertility in South Korea – from past to present.

The main aim of the research was to find out about the students' plans on having children. The research questions were as follows:

- Do students want to have children?
- How many children do they want to have?
- What is the appropriate age for having children to the respondents?

The main research tool used in the research was a survey questionnaire (Gruszczyński 1999) containing 43 questions. The collected research material underwent a statistical analysis in SPSS software.

Opinions on family of the students as a sociological category are very important from the cognitive and practical point of view for contemporary sociology of the family. Firstly, they are a pattern-forming layer (group of comparative reference) for generations of their peers. Secondly, students are under the strongest pressure of post-modern culture and its individual patterns of self-fulfilment – also in South Korea (see the results of the research). It is in this social environment that the young Koreans think about future plans concerning having children and the social group they constitute will in a few years reach the age in which most young people in South Korea have children.

The characteristic of the research sample

The surveyed respondents are students of the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul in South Korea. The empirical research covered a research sample of 104 students. The research sample was varied by gender, age, year of study and religion.

The study group consisted of 47 women and 57 men (see: data in Table 1). There were 16 respondents of the age group between 18 and 19 years old, 42 respondents aged between 20 and 22, 28 respondents aged between 23 and 25 and 18 students aged between 26 and 28 (see: data in Table 2).

Table 1. Gender of the surveyed students from South Korea

Gender	<i>N</i>	%
Women	47	45.2
Men	57	54.8
Total	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

Table 2. Age of the surveyed students from South Korea

Age	N	%
18–19	16	15.4
20–22	42	40.4
23–25	28	26.9
26–28	18	17.3
Total	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

Most of the respondents, close to 86%, lived in a big city. On the other hand, only 13.5% of the surveyed lived in a small town. Only one respondent lived in a village (see: data in Table 3.).

Table 3. Place of residence of students from South Korea

Place of residence	N	%
Big city ($N > 50\,000$)	89	85.6
Small town ($N < 50\,000$)	14	13.5
Village	1	1.0
Total	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

Almost 92% of the students had siblings – including 94% of women and 90% of men. Only three surveyed female students (6.4%) and six male students (10.5%) did not have any siblings (see: data in Table 4).

Table 4. Number of students vs. gender and having siblings

Having siblings	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	44	93.6	51	89.5	95	91.3
No	3	6.4	6	10.5	9	8.7
Total	47	100.0	57	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

The survey included the students of all years of bachelor studies in the field of Polish philology. The pilot studies conducted before showed that the field of study does not have any significant influence on the statistically studied issues concerning planning of the family, so the research sample consisted of the stu-

dents of one field of study, which had been chosen deliberately in order to avoid feminization or masculinisation of the research sample. The bachelor studies last four years in South Korea (see: Petkiewicz 2014.08.18, korea-online.pl).

The research included 16 first grade students (including 10 women and 6 men), 42 second grade students (including 18 women and 24 men), 28 third grade students (including 10 women and 18 men) and 18 fourth grade students (including 9 women and 9 men) (see: data in Table 5).

Table 5. Number of students in accordance with the year of study

The year of study	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
year 1	10	21.3	6	10.5	16	15.4
year 2	18	38.3	24	42.1	42	40.4
year 3	10	21.3	18	31.6	28	26.9
year 4	9	19.1	9	15.8	18	17.3
Total	47	100.0	57	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

Table 6. Religious denomination of students from South Korea

Religion	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Christianity	11	23.4	7	12.3	18	17.3
Buddhism	3	6.4	7	12.3	10	9.6
Protestantism	10	21.3	16	28.1	26	25.0
Atheism	23	48.9	27	47.4	50	48.1
Total	47	100.0	57	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

The surveyed students were different in terms of religious denomination. A considerable percentage of the respondents were also atheists (48.1%). Every fourth surveyed person is protestant (25.0%). Slightly more than 17% of the surveyed were Christians and almost 10% profess Buddhism (see: data in Table 6). The research sample did not include students following the philosophical and religious system of Confucianism.

Future plans of having children

The respondents were asked questions on family planning in the survey questionnaire. The questions were as follows: Do you plan to have children in the future? How many children do you want to have in the future? What is the appropriate age for having children?

The statistical analysis of the above mentioned questions will show the plans of the surveyed group in the sphere of future family life.

Table 7. Future plans of having children vs. gender

Do you plan to have children in the future? (even if you have a child/children)	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	29	61.7	44	77.2	73	70.2
No	4	8.5	0	0.0	4	3.8
Don't know	14	29.8	13	22.8	27	26.0
Total	47	100.0	57	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

The analysis of the conducted research shows that 70% of the respondents plan to have children in the future – including much more men (77.2%) than women (61.7%). It should also be noted that almost one third of the women were undecided in this regard (29.8%). Men who did not know whether they want to have children in the future or not constituted less than 23%. It is noteworthy that no man declared that he does not want to have children (0%), in contrast to women (8.5%). Differences between men and women concerning planning of having children in the future are statistically significant – $p < 0.05$ (test $\chi^2 = 6.215$; $p = 0.045$; $V=0.244$) (see: data in Table 7). The analysis of the research results indicates that a definitely higher percentage – by 15.5 percentage points – of the surveyed men in comparison to women plan to have children in the future. It may indicate that men are more influenced by the Korean family tradition, according to which having a family is very important. The family is a basic value according to the Confucian philosophy, which is strongly rooted in the society. All members of the Korean family are subjected to the head of the family – a man, and this is the reason why it is so important for men to have children and a family.

The age of the surveyed students does not have statistically significant influence on the plans concerning having children – $p > 0.05$ (test $\chi^2 = 3.156$; $p = 0.789$; $V=0.123$). The students of all age categories mostly plan to have children. However, it should be noted that students of the highest age category, that is, aged between 26 and 28 were slightly more decided in this regard (83.3%) than

other students of the lower age categories. On the other hand, almost 30% of the students aged between 18 and 19, 20 and 22 and 23 and 25 were undecided as to planning to have children in the future (see: data in Table 8). It may indicate that students of the higher age category are more emotionally and physically ready to become parents, so they are more likely to plan to have children in the future. In two years the students of this age category will be in the age category in which the highest percentage of children is born in South Korea (see: data in Table 9).

The religion or lack thereof does not exert a statistically significant influence on planning to have children in the future either – $p < 0.05$ (test $\chi^2 = 5.101$; $p = 0.531$; $V=0.157$). Christian students (88.9%), Buddhists (70.0%), Protestants (65.4%) and Atheists (66.0%) mostly plan to have children in the future. It should be noted that a large percentage of Protestants (26.9%) and Atheists (30.0%) were undecided in this regard (see: data in Table 10). It can therefore be concluded that regardless of religion or its lack the surveyed students think of enlarging the family in the future.

Table 8. Future plans of having children vs. age

Do you plan to have children in the future? (even if you have a child/children)	Age								Total	
	18–19		20–22		23–25		26–28			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	10	66.7	29	67.4	19	67.9	15	83.3	73	70.2
No	1	6.7	1	2.3	1	3.6	1	5.6	4	3.8
Don't know	4	26.7	13	30.2	8	28.6	2	11.1	27	26.0
Total	15	100.0	43	100.0	28	100.0	18	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

Because of the small number of students who do not have any siblings and those who live in a small town and in a village, unfortunately it is impossible to verify whether having a sibling or the place of residence have significant influence on the decision to have children, number of the children they want to have or the opinion on the appropriate age to have them.

The students were also asked in the questionnaire of the survey how many children they want to have in the future. The statistical analysis shows that gender does not have any statistically significant influence on the decision on having a particular number of children – $p > 0.05$ (test $\chi^2 = 7.872$; $p = 0.163$; $V=0.275$). Most respondents plan to have two children in the future (54.8%) – including almost 53% of the women and 59% of the men. Slightly over 19% of the respondents want to have even three children (19.2%). On the other hand, less than 14% want to have only one child. Only slightly over 6% of the women declared that they want “as many children as life gives,” and less than 5% do not plan to have children (see: data in Table 11).

Table 9. Age of women giving birth to first child in period from 2010 to 2014 in South Korea

By age of mother	By birth order	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
Total	Total	212,079	212,572	235,592	229,144	227,270
	First child	109,625	109,467	121,225	116,872	114,022
Less than 15 years old	Total	13	13	10	5	15
	First child	12	13	6	4	7
15–19 years old	Total	1,226	1,320	1,404	1,438	1,335
	First child	1,126	1,201	1,250	1,316	1,112
20–24 years old	Total	10,392	10,824	11,973	11,919	11,837
	First child	7,656	8,115	8,848	8,999	8,710
25–29 years old	Total	46,877	50,183	62,184	66,590	71,131
	First child	31,997	34,028	42,263	44,812	46,818
30–34 years old	Total	107,663	107,275	116,049	107,924	103,678
	First child	53,220	52,141	54,969	49,051	45,641
35–39 years old	Total	39,932	37,537	38,258	35,919	34,242
	First child	13,699	12,296	12,073	11,032	10,229
40–44 years old	Total	5,691	5,160	5,455	4,937	4,440
	First child	1,843	1,617	1,733	1,507	1,329
45–49 years old	Total	158	147	210	239	205
	First child	42	48	73	96	87
50 years old or more	Total	12	17	21	39	36
	First child	6	2	8	8	11
Age unknown	Total	145	96	28	134	351
	First child	24	6	2	47	78

Source: Vital Statistics, data available on www.kosis.kr, accessed 30.06.2016. http://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList/statisticsList_01List.jsp?vwcd=MT_ETITLE&parentId=A#SubContwcd=MT_ETITLE&parentId=A#SubCont.

Table 10. Future plans of having children vs. religion

Do you plan to have children in the future? (even if you have a child/children)	Religion								Total	
	Christianity		Buddhism		Protestantism		Atheism			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	16	88.9	7	70.0	17	65.4	33	66.0	73	70.2
No	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	7.7	2	4.0	4	3.8
Don't know	2	11.1	3	30.0	7	26.9	15	30.0	27	26.0
Total	18	100.0	10	100.0	26	100.0	50	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

Table 11. Future plans of having children vs. gender

How many children do you want to have?	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
One	6	9.5	8	19.5	14	13.5
Two	33	52.4	24	58.5	57	54.8
Three	12	19.0	8	19.5	20	19.2
Four	5	7.9	1	2.4	6	5.8
As many as life gives	4	6.3	0	0.0	4	3.8
None – I don't want to have children	3	4.8	0	0.0	3	2.9
Total	63	100.0	41	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

The students aged between 18 and 19 (60.0%) and between 20 and 22 (55.8%) mostly plan to have two or three children in the future (20.0%; 27.9%, respectively). On the other hand, the surveyed aged groups between 23 and 25 (53.6%) and between 26 and 28 (50.0%) plan to have two children or one (21.4%; 22.2%, respectively). Differences between the age categories are not statistically significant – $p > 0.05$ (test $\chi^2 = 14.086$; $p = 0.519$; $V=0.212$) (see: data in Table 12). On the basis of the analysis of the research results it can be assumed that the younger the students are the more children they plan to have (i.e., three children) because they have more time until they reach the age category most appropriate to have children in South Korea – which is the age category of 30 – 34 years old (see: data in Table 9). Therefore, those are plans on having children in more or less 10 years – during this time the number of planned children can change and be influenced by many social or economic factors, family situation, living conditions, health condition, and other factors.

Table 12. Future plans of having children vs. age

How many children do you want to have?	Age								Total	
	18–19		20–22		23–25		26–28			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
One	2	13.3	2	4.7	6	21.4	4	22.2	14	13.5
Two	9	60.0	24	55.8	15	53.6	9	50.0	57	54.8
Three	3	20.0	12	27.9	3	10.7	2	11.1	20	19.2
Four	0	0.0	3	7.0	2	7.1	1	5.6	6	5.8
As many as life gives	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	3.6	2	11.1	4	3.8
None – I don't want to have children	1	6.7	1	2.3	1	3.6	0	0.0	3	2.9
Total	15	100.0	43	100.0	28	100.0	18	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

The surveyed Christian students (55.6%), Buddhists (60.0%) and Atheists (68.0%) mostly plan to have two children. On the other hand, the Protestant respondents are divided into three groups – the first group wants to have three children (30.8%), the second and the third group want to have one child or two children (equally: 26.9%). However, the differences are not statistically important – $p > 0.05$ (test $\chi^2 = 21.544$; $p = 0.120$; $V=0.263$) (see: data in Table 13).

Table 13. Future plans of having children vs. religion

How many children would you like to have?	Religion								Total	
	Christianity		Buddhism		Protestantism		Atheism			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
One	2	11.1	3	30.0	7	26.9	2	4.0	14	13.5
Two	10	55.6	6	60.0	7	26.9	34	68.0	57	54.8
Three	3	16.7	1	10.0	8	30.8	8	16.0	20	19.2
Four	2	11.1	0	0.0	1	3.8	3	6.0	6	5.8
As many as life gives	1	5.6	0	0.0	2	7.7	1	2.0	4	3.8
None – I don't want to have children	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	3.8	2	4.0	3	2.9
Total	18	100.0	10	100.0	26	100.0	50	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

The surveyed students were asked in the survey about the appropriate age to have children. The analysis of the survey results shows that the age categories indicated by the respondents as the best age categories to have children are significantly differentiated by gender – $p < 0.05$ (test $\chi^2 = 15.220$; $p = 0.019$; $V=0.383$). 45% of the women declared that the best age to have children is between 26 and 28 and between 29 and 31 (34.0%) On the other hand, 49% of men declared that the best age category is between 29 and 31. One fifth of the surveyed men (21.1%) indicated also that it is best to have children at the age between 32 and 34 and between 26 and 28 (19.3%) (see: data in Table 14). The difference between the age categories indicated by men and women may show that women are more mature and ready for parenthood than men. The best age to have children indicated by the respondents only partially corresponds to the real age at which women give birth most frequently in South Korea. According to the statistical data of 2014, most women gave birth at an age between 30 and 34 (see: Statistics Korea; Table 9). The surveyed female students indicated that it is best to have children earlier, that is, between 26 and 31 – therefore several years earlier than what actually is the social reality.

Table 14. The best age to have children vs. gender

The best age to have children	Women		Men		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Under 20 years old	2	4.3	2	3.5	4	3.8
23–25	5	10.6	3	5.3	8	7.7
26–28	21	44.7	11	19.3	32	30.8
29–31	16	34.0	28	49.1	44	42.3
32–34	2	4.3	12	21.1	14	13.5
35–36	0	0.0	1	1.8	1	1.0
Over 37 years old	1	2.1	0	0.0	1	1.0
Total	47	100.0	57	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

Table 15. The best age to have children vs. religion

The best age to have children	Religion								Total	
	Christianity		Buddhism		Protestantism		Atheism			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Under 20 years old	1	5.6	1	10.0	0	0.0	2	4.0	4	3.8
23–25	2	11.1	0	0.0	4	15.4	2	4.0	8	7.7
26–28	1	5.6	1	10.0	10	38.5	20	40.0	32	30.8
29–31	10	55.6	5	50.0	7	26.9	22	44.0	44	42.3
32–34	4	22.2	3	30.0	4	15.4	3	6.0	14	13.5
35–36	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	1	1.0
Over 37 years old	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	3.8	0	0.0	1	1.0
Total	18	100.0	10	100.0	26	100.0	50	100.0	104	100.0

Source: author's own research

According to the Christian and Buddhist students the best age to have children is between 29 and 31 (55.6%; 50.0%, respectively) and the age category between 32 and 34 (22.2%; 30.0%, respectively). On the other hand, the Protestant students believe that the best age is lower and it is between 26 and 28 (38.5%) and also almost 27% of respondents claimed that the best age is between 29 and 31. In contrast, the Atheist students believed that the best age to have children is between 29 and 31 (44.0%) or between 26 and 28 (40.0%). Although there are differences in the best age categories to have children indicated by respondents, they are not statistically significant – $p > 0.05$ (test $\chi^2 = 24.711$; $p = 0.133$; $V=0.281$) (see: data in Table 15).

Conclusions

The analysis of the empirical evidence shows that gender is the independent variable which has a statistically significant influence on the opinions of the respondents concerning future plans related to having a family – however, only in two cases. Gender significantly influences the willingness to have children and the indication of the appropriate age to have children. Religion or its lack as well as age do not have any statistically significant influence on plans of having children by the surveyed students. The respondents mostly plan to have two children in the future.

The analysis of the research results shows that more men than women plan to have children in the future and, what is important, almost every third woman was undecided in this regard. This can be caused by the increasing participation of women in the process of development and in the labour market, which results in postponing the decision to have children to a later age or resignation from having children. The following considerations by Korean researchers are a clear confirmation of this assertion:

The average South Korean woman now waits until after her 29th birthday to marry and after her 30th to start a family. Some women never do either. The chances of their never marrying have risen from 9% in 2000 to 15% today. And South Korea's fertility rate, now at 1.3 children per woman, has remained stubbornly low ... Faced with overwhelming pressures, South Korean women have gone on baby-strike (The Economist, economist.com, 26.10.2013).

Despite enticing incentives from the government, South Korean women struggle with the choice to leave their careers to raise children. The modern South Korean woman is ambitious. She has worked hard for her career and is hesitant to give it up. Although it is probably what her mother did as her sole occupation, for some being at home now seems mundane in comparison to the many goals and promises that a career provides (S. Roberts 2013).

It should also be highlighted that contemporary Korean women are likening themselves to European women. They are more and more marked by individualism and the will to be successful in professional life – this is indicated by the decreasing fertility rate in South Korea (1,3 in 2014), which is below generation renewal, and the increasing participation of women on the labour market. According to the World Bank Indicators data, the number of working women in South Korea has been constantly increasing since 1984 (37%). In 2015, 41.5% of women were active on the labour market.

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